

“Stephen McAlpine has written a book that we desperately need. It’s searching, sane, deeply biblical and, best of all, profoundly encouraging. If you want to understand what’s going on in our world right now, then you need to read this book. If you want to work out what it means to live faithfully at school, at university, at work and even at home, then you need to read this book. If you have ever felt like the ‘bad guy’, then you really do need to read this book. Perhaps I haven’t been clear enough: I think everyone needs to read this book!”

Gary Millar, Principal, Queensland Theological College, Australia

“With piercing insight, McAlpine skilfully draws parallels between the battles we face today in our culture and familiar Bible stories, impelling us to stand up courageously for the truth of the gospel against a tide of opposition. Through this book I have been forewarned and forearmed by the gospel, which he applies in a clear, radical, inspiring and relevant way. A timely wake-up call that has already proved invaluable in my personal witness.”

Linda Allcock, Author, *Deeper Still*

“As an Asian kid growing up in the West, I was never sure if my loyalty was to the Hong Kong we left behind or the Australia we now found ourselves in. This is also what it’s like to be a Christian in our new 21st-century society. Do we long for a Christendom that is no longer there? Or do we set up camp in this post-Christendom world? But what does that even look like? In *Being the Bad Guys*, Stephen McAlpine equips Christians to live in the new norm—a world that sees Christians as the bad guys. This is both a wake-up call and the toolkit that we need to survive and thrive. Now, just as in the times of Daniel in Babylon, is the time for us to shine.”

Sam Chan, City Bible Forum, Australia;
Author, *Evangelism in a Skeptical World*

“Stephen McAlpine doesn’t just describe the chilling change in our Western cultural climate. He also shows the way to follow Jesus through the storms.”

Collin Hansen, Editorial Director, The Gospel Coalition

“If the men of Issachar ‘understood the times and knew what to do’ (1 Chronicles 12 v 32), then Stephen McAlpine has written an Issacharine book! With deft cultural analysis and profoundly biblical lenses, he helps us see the shape of faithful Christian living in our age. And while our challenges feel new, McAlpine insists that they find deep, challenging and illuminating parallels in the history of God’s people. With the help of Abraham, Daniel, Haggai and the Corinthians, McAlpine points us to cross-shaped, Christ-like, Spirit-filled wisdom that will bless and fortify a new generation—inspiring them to follow Jesus.”

Glen Scrivener, Evangelist; Author, *Long Story Short*

“McAlpine is neither superficial nor simplistic. He recognises the complexity of the spaghetti-like strands of the culture in which we live. However, rather than paralysis or retreat, he offers Christians and their church communities biblically wise and practical yet strategic suggestions. Recommended.”

Dan Strange, Director, Oak Hill College, London; Author, *Plugged In*

“This is a must-read for anyone grappling to understand the staggering changes in our society as all the old certainties—and notions of how we relate to each other—are suddenly swept out to sea and replaced by a strident new authoritarianism that seeks to drown out all dissent. McAlpine is deeply perceptive and writes with the simple clarity that only a master of complex issues can provide. At last we can find a neat and accessible explanation of what is happening in our culture.”

John Anderson, Former Deputy Prime Minister of Australia

“It’s undoubtedly a fallacy to think that any period of history has been static, free from any significant societal change. But it’s undoubtedly equally true that in our particular period of history we are witnessing change that is both swift and seismic. One of the most jarring changes for Christians has been our transformation from being good guys to bad guys. At a time like this we need guidance on how to live for Jesus, and that’s exactly the guidance Stephen McAlpine so aptly provides in this excellent book.”

Tim Challies, Blogger; Author, *Epic* and *Visual Theology*

“For too many Christians, the biggest fear is that they will be out of step with the culture; but Jesus promises that to follow him is to be, at some points, at odds with the ethos of a fallen world. Pastor Stephen McAlpine offers a refreshing call to Christian courage—and yet urges Christians to avoid rudeness and incivility. Readers will come away with both a newfound boldness to live for Christ in a confusing world and a countercultural joy that will radiate in their public and private witness.”

Daniel Darling, Senior Vice-President of Communications, NRB;
Author, *A Way with Words* and *The Dignity Revolution*

“There are books that tell us about the culture, there are books that tell us about evangelism, there are books that tell us about apologetics, there are books that tell us about the local church—but what I love about *Being the Bad Guys* is that it does all four. Stephen McAlpine is an astute cultural observer, an experienced pastor and an excellent writer. I hope that this will be read widely not only by church leaders but by any Christian who wants to understand where we are and where we should be.”

David Robertson, Director, Third Space, Sydney

“Clear, contemporary and compelling. This is an outstanding book which lays out in a highly accessible way the main contours of how our present society is hostile to Christianity, and how Christians and the church could respond in a biblical, God-honouring, soul-winning way.”

Melvin Tinker, Former Vicar of St John’s Newland, Hull, UK

“This is the most sensible book I’ve read in a long time! By which I mean, Stephen explains with clarity and realism how modern culture no longer sees Christian belief as quaint but views it with suspicion or worse. Yet this is no counsel of despair. Rather, it offers a truthful and faithful path forward which will give Christians confidence and grit as they hold out the word of life to a highly confused world.”

Matt Fuller, Author, *Be True to Yourself*

Being the Bad Guys

How to Live for Jesus
in a World That Says You Shouldn't

Stephen McAlpine

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To Jill, who has helped me live for Jesus

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Introduction

“You mean *I’m* the bad guy? How did that happen?” It’s not easy to be the baddie. It’s particularly disconcerting when you didn’t use to be, but then you suddenly realise that that’s how others see you. And so it is that this line, from the 1993 film *Falling Down*, has lodged itself in the front of my mind in the last couple of years. It stars Michael Douglas as William Foster, who starts his day (and the film) as an average law-abiding guy. He ends it as the bad guy on the wrong side of the law—and it comes as a complete surprise to him. He has no idea how it has happened or how to deal with it.

Most Christians don’t have much in common with Douglas’s character, William Foster. I don’t know you personally, but I’m guessing that, unlike Foster, you haven’t threatened anyone with a rocket launcher or shot a police officer. But I am guessing that in the past year or so you’ve had a conversation with a non-Christian neighbour that didn’t go well, or you’ve overheard a discussion between work colleagues expressing anger over Christian views on a particular issue, or you’ve read or watched a piece in

the media taking potshots at biblical ethics. And you've thought to yourself something like:

"You mean we're the bad guys? How, when, why did that happen?"

Because, yes, in the eyes of much of Western society, Christianity is the bad guy (or at least is fast becoming so). Christianity is the problem. And it's happened so quickly that it's taken us by surprise.

Only a few generations ago, Christianity was the good guy, the solution to what was bad. Rather than being on the wrong side of the law, we were the law. Christian morality was assumed and passed mainly unchallenged. The cultural, legal and political power structures affirmed Christians. Then something changed. Over the course of the twentieth century, we became just one of the guys: one option among many—a voice to be considered but not to be followed unquestioningly. If Christianity worked for you, fine; if it didn't work for me, also fine.

Most of us think we still live in that world. Most Christian books, sermons and podcasts assume that we do. In many ways, we've only just worked out how to live well as one of the guys.

But the problem is that that's not where we are now. The tide has shifted further. Increasingly Christianity is viewed as the bad guy. Christianity is no longer an option; it's a problem. The cultural, political and legal guns that Christianity once held are now trained on us—and it's

happened quickly. The number of those professing faith has fallen dramatically. The number of those who reject the faith they held until their late teens has risen dramatically. The seat at the cultural table that we assumed was ours for keeps is increasingly being given to others. We're on the wrong side of history, the wrong side of so many issues and conversations. If this were a Western, we would be the guys wearing the black hats whose appearance is accompanied by the foreboding soundtrack. It's come as a surprise, we're not sure how it happened, we don't like it and we don't feel like we deserve it—but we are the bad guys now.

So what do we do about it?

The Best Bad Guy

Being on the wrong side is tiring and demoralising. It makes us feel defeated or angry. But I'm not going to tell you how to stop being one of the bad guys, because the only way to stop being a bad guy in the eyes of the world is to become what the world says is a good guy. And right now, that means compromising in all kinds of areas where the world beckons one way and the Bible points another. So this book isn't about how to stop being the bad guys; it's about how to be the bad guys. It's about how to be the best bad guy you can be—to refuse to be surprised, confused, despairing and mad about it, and to find a way to be calm, clear-sighted, confident and even joyful in it.

After all, this isn't new. If we look back far enough, we'll see that God's people have been "the bad guys" before. Scripture assumes it. Jesus predicted it. The apostles experienced it. The church, in most times and in most places, has lived it. Now the baton passes to us.

Before we start, two things are worth mentioning. First, Western culture is not always wrong. When secular society calls out Christians as bad guys, our first question should be: are they right? We have to acknowledge that the church has a mixed history, and when the church enjoyed power and influence, too often it used it in exactly the opposite way to its founder: to serve itself, to make its members comfortable. We have often been too little like Jesus, and for that we need to stop trying to justify or excuse ourselves, and hold our hands up, apologise, and do better. We have been perpetrators who made life hard for others who we decided were "bad guys". Not every critical voice is simply out to get us, and some critical voices have much to teach us; there are genuine wrongs that we need to right. Yet at the same time, the fact is that often we are accused of doing wrong not because we are living too little like Jesus but because we are living too much like him.

Which brings me to the second thing. In this book, a lot of the time we'll be thinking about the way Western secularism and biblical Christianity have diametrically opposed views on many areas of sexual ethics and gender identity. That's because 21st-century Western culture

sees accepting its take on these things as fundamental to human identity, freedom, and flourishing—and so it is the territory in which Christians are most of all seen as the bad guys, where biblical ethics are not seen merely as laughable or outdated or repressed but as shameful, harmful and repressive. Our views are not merely seen as wrong but dangerous. Christians are sometimes accused of being obsessed about sex, and I suppose this book would seem to give credence to that charge. But the reason we talk about it, and the reason this book will keep returning to it, is because our culture talks so much about it and brooks no compromise over it. Increasingly, the first question we're asked when people realise we are Bible-believing Christians is not "Do you believe dinosaurs existed?" (a question often asked back when I was young) but "What do you think about homosexuality?" or "Where do you stand on same-sex marriage?" The charge is that not to believe in dinosaurs is stupid, but not to agree with same-sex marriage is bad.

Yes, we're the bad guys now. And that's ok. That we are experiencing a backlash after a remarkable period of religious peace and tolerance for the church in the West puts us back in the shoes of many Christians throughout history, and indeed of many in the current era around the world. The answers to how to live as bad guys are there, simply because the problem of finding ourselves rejected by the world has always been there. As we explore the problem and then unpack the answers the Bible offers, we will find ourselves able to do what many Christians have

done down the ages: live holy, happy, loving and joyous lives that compel as many people as they repel: to be the best bad guys we can be.

Part One: How Did We Get to Be the Bad Guys?

1. Why This Sudden Hostility?

British doctor David Mackereth lost his job in 2019 for saying he would not use preferred pronouns for transgender patients, on the basis of his Christian beliefs about gender and sexuality. He took his employer to a tribunal hearing. He lost his case.

That was a shock to Dr Mackereth, but it is the reason the court gave for its findings that is most revealing. It was Dr Mackereth's use of Genesis 1 v 27 and its binary view of male and female that proved to be his downfall. His religious conviction did not protect his position; instead the tribunal stated:

*"Belief in Genesis 1:27, lack of belief in transgenderism and conscientious objection to transgenderism in our judgment are incompatible with human dignity and conflict with the fundamental rights of others, specifically here, transgender individuals."*¹

The catchcry of “equal value, dignity and worth” is grounded upon the biblical statement that humans are made in the image of God. For the Christian, this reality is enhanced by the incarnation, in which God became a man—one of us. Historian Tom Holland observes that these convictions did not arise from the ether. They are not “fundamental”:

*“That human beings have rights; that they are born equal; that they are owed sustenance and shelter, and refuge from persecution: these were never self evident truths.”*²

Holland explains that the “universal” human-rights declarations of organisations such as the United Nations are in fact quite local and historical, finding their origins in documents drawn up by canon lawyers in medieval Europe. That is, they have not always and everywhere been accepted or even thought of. They spring from the truths of Genesis 1. Yet in one pronouncement by Dr Mackereth’s judge, his belief in those truths was not merely dismissed as archaic but denounced as dangerous.

And that is but one example. Every day my social-media feeds are clogged with headlines from Christian organisations railing against yet another political action or legal judgment against Christian practices and values.

Christians feel shock as new laws are passed across the Western world which preference LGBTQI rights over religious freedoms. There is anger over unsuccessful challenges to late-term abortion and euthanasia laws. There is worry that efforts to keep Scripture in schools

will fail, or that moves to cut funding for religious charities will succeed. And all this against a backdrop of global persecution against Christians which gets little to no oxygen in the mainstream media.

The question we may ask is not simply, “How did this happen?” but “How did this happen so quickly?” Wasn’t it only yesterday that Christianity was begrudgingly accepted as a societal good? A bit like taking cod-liver oil in the fifties: not all that palatable, but beneficial. But now? It’s not only unpalatable; it’s positively toxic—and now it’s time to get rid of it.

We’re being viewed as angry, entitled, sticking our noses in where we are not wanted, and constantly grumbling about our loss of status and influence. Even our call for religious freedoms is viewed as self-interest. Whose freedoms were we advocating for when we called the shots? Without needing to reach back as far as the Crusades, Christians have been accused of being slow out of the blocks when dealing with systemic racism and all too silent when homosexuals were mistreated and imprisoned. And there’s always the spectre of institutional child abuse hanging over the church. So when the cultural, legal and political forces corner and curtail us, they’re simply doing their job of protecting everyone else from us, aren’t they?

Christians throughout the West are confused and uncertain. Like William Foster standing on Venice Pier, we’re astonished that the way we see ourselves is no longer how others see us. And it’s all happened in record time.

The Freedom and Joy Program

How did this change happen? How did we get to be the bad guys, and so soon? It would be easy to say that the culture has simply rejected the gospel and is running helter-skelter towards the abyss of a zombie apocalypse of societal collapse, fuelled by sexual orgies and major conflict.

But that does not explain why what is now being offered to us is presented so positively by culture, politics and law. The zombie apocalypse is—stubbornly, maddeningly—not arriving. What is arriving is the hope of a new world that is all glitter and rainbows: a good-news story! Online articles, news stories, movies: these all showcase people who, once lost and confused or struggling with identity because of societally imposed standards, have now been freed by being true to who they feel themselves to be. The former Bruce Jenner, an Olympic champion decathlete and epitome of masculinity, is unveiled to the world as Caitlyn, an example of how we can soar above our pain and hurt and become someone new—and all of our own making. We are being offered a rival gospel: a narrative that seeks first to expose the Christian gospel as bad news, and then to replace it with much-needed good news.

It is this “other” gospel that is driving programs such as the Safe Schools Program in Australia, in which gender fluidity is presented as a solution to bullying problems in state schools. When the program’s creator, La Trobe University academic Roz Ward, was challenged about her

intent in 2017, she said, “I will never give up fighting for a more free and joyful world”.³

Freedom and joy in the world. Aren’t they our ideas? Is that not our language to describe the future new creation that Christ has won for his people? Melbourne pastor and author Mark Sayers argues in his 2019 book, *Reappearing Church*, that the new reality we are experiencing doesn’t create a new set of concepts and ideas to explain itself. It doesn’t need to. Christianity in the West, long seen as moribund and empty, has left all of its receptacles and tools behind it as it retreats to the fringes. This new movement has simply picked up and refilled those buckets.

Freedom and human dignity are kingdom concepts. These ideas are grounded in the Bible. They formed the basis of the Christian movement—a movement that swept the world. And they are highly attractive and compelling. Everyone wants the fruit of these ideas.

But the root of these ideas? Not so much. Sayers says that our progressive culture seeks the “kingdom without the King”.⁴ The ambition is to replicate the kingdom vision of the good life—a future world of human rights, dignity, freedom, love and equality—but all without Jesus at the centre. And, frustratingly for those among us who may wish to see the whole thing come crashing down in order to prove how right we are, this vision appears to be progressing quite well. At least on the surface.

Equality and diversity programs are now par for the course in large corporations. Freedom for sexual minorities is celebrated by secularists everywhere. Emancipation for every marginalised group is showcased across social media. Meanwhile, the church is presented as curmudgeonly, grumpy and downright angry that it is no longer running the freedom and joy program.

Yet while the King has been removed from the kingdom program, the throne has not been vacated. It has been usurped. Who by? Me. You. The individual is now enthroned in this new kingdom.

Politics professor Dale Kuehne has labelled the late modern West the “iWorld”. In the traditional world, or “tWorld”, our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world was discovered through “relationships of obligation”.⁵ Society was held together by a recognition that family relationship structures and a commitment to maintaining them—sometimes at personal cost to the individual—was the pathway to flourishing. By contrast, the iWorld locates meaning and purpose within the individual, and relationships of obligation have been replaced by “relationships of choice”. Our compass for who we are is not pointed outwards but inwards. We have become the source of meaning—our own meaning—and we only let people into our lives if they affirm and confirm our self-appointed True North.

I cannot emphasise enough how important this shift in how we view relationships is—nor how long it has been in

the making. Although it seems just yesterday that we were being told to adopt newly-invented pronouns such as Xi and Xim, the roots of this individual enthronement first grew in the soil of the Enlightenment, several hundred years ago. What we are experiencing today is not the sudden discovery of a new way of looking at the world. Rather, it is the final flowering of a view of humanity that began long before the word “cisgender” ever made it to the humanities departments of our universities.

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor calls this “the age of authenticity”—an age which traces its roots back through the sexual revolution, past the post-war boom, all the way to the Romantic period that began in the late 18th century.⁶ Poets such as William Wordsworth and Lord Byron valued expressive individualism and a deep trust in one’s emotional responses. It was untamed nature that they saw as authentic, contrasting it with the soul-destroying strictures of modern life and institutions. In our own age, authenticity is defined by how true you are to yourself; not how true you are to your calling, or your community, or your covenant relationships, but to yourself. This authenticity search has taken on dazzling speed and has, it seems, reached its zenith. The question is, why now?

A Sudden Revolution

The short answer is that massive technological progress is fast-tracking the age of authenticity. While the philosophical shifts have been underway for centuries, we have reached a

tipping point today through the incredible transformations that digital technologies have brought to the world and to how we think, live and respond. Lifestyles that were once the domain of the cultural and financial elite are now democratised through the power of the iPhone. Ideas that once took years to filter into the mainstream are conceived, birthed and implemented at breathtaking speed thanks to new forms of instant communication.

Independence and sexual freedom—once only possible for those protected by wealth from their social and relational costs—are now available to everyone. YouTubers and Instagram influencers spread concepts virally, at next to no cost, to teenagers sitting in their bedrooms, racking up huge followings in the process.

One such influencer is Jazz Jennings, who came out as trans while still in single-digit figures age-wise. Jazz's story has been well documented and celebrated by media influencers globally, and Jazz's YouTube channel has millions of views. In 2018, *USA Today* stated, "Jazz Jennings is all smiles after undergoing gender confirmation surgery". That word "confirmation" declares that the contest around identity definitions is over. Yet "complications" following Jazz's surgery remind us that it's not as simple as "becoming who you know you are". Gender-transition surgery is harrowing and mostly irreversible; for many dissatisfied patients, it begins a cycle of repeat surgeries. Years of medical interventions and hormone drugs often follow. Yet